

# The News Journal

## **Altering course now may help Iraq reach sought-after goals**

By: Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.)  
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Over the past several months, Americans have become increasingly skeptical about our ongoing military presence in Iraq, leading to a fierce debate about how to succeed in Iraq and when to redeploy U.S. troops.

With so much discord here at home, I was surprised and heartened to learn during my recent trip to Iraq and four other Middle East nations that there's a growing consensus among U.S. and Iraqi civilian and military officials on a reasonable path forward that many Americans can embrace.

Despite some grievous mistakes made by the Bush administration following the ouster of Saddam Hussein, too much is at stake for us to "cut and run." But somewhere between withdrawing all U.S. forces in six months and "staying the course" is a common-sense policy and path forward for the United States, Iraq and its Arab neighbors.

I believe this month's parliamentary elections and the likely emergence of a coalition government in Iraq give us a great opportunity -- not so much to stay the course but to begin to alter it.

This altered course would provide for a moderate but significant redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq beginning early next year, but it doesn't end there. We must also redouble our efforts to enlist the full cooperation of the Arab world and others to stabilize Iraq politically and economically, as we continue to help Iraqi military and police forces shoulder more of the burden of providing security in their country.

On the sensitive issue of withdrawing U.S. troops, I believe that if we were to withdraw all of our military forces within six months or even a year, we would leave the country in danger of civil war, and America and Iraq's neighbors would be less safe than they were before we invaded Iraq.

The truth is, a modest American force may well be needed in Iraq for some time. While it won't be anywhere close to the roughly 160,000 troops we have now, America likely will need to maintain some presence in Iraq, if the Iraqis want us to, just as we currently do in Afghanistan, Kosovo and several other places around the world.

But the president's open-ended statements about "staying the course" cause many Iraqis to question our nation's true intentions. More and more, Iraqis view our troops as occupiers, not liberators. To them, the president's rhetoric is code for "we're here for your oil and we're not leaving until we get it," an interpretation that fuels the very insurgency we're trying to defeat.

That's why it makes sense to announce as early as January that we plan to redeploy a significant number of American troops from Iraq in 2006, and then do so shortly thereafter. Taking this step will help make clearer to most Iraqis our desire ultimately to leave Iraq and its natural resources in the hands of Iraqis.

These views are not mine alone. They reflect the views of Iraq's civilian and military leaders, as well as those of top American officials on the ground. We should listen to them. Otherwise, I fear our troops, who continue to perform courageously under incredibly difficult circumstances, will remain targets of opportunity for months or even years to come.

Although much of the debate in America has focused on withdrawing troops, if all we do by the end of next year is reduce our troop levels, we will not set up Iraqis for success -- we will set them up for failure.

There's also a political war to win, and it will not be easy. America's ambassador to Iraq, the gifted Zalmay Khalilzad, has done a remarkable job this year of narrowing the differences between competing factions in Iraq. It now looks like turnout for this month's parliamentary elections will be strong, even among minority Sunnis, and result in the need to form a coalition government.

The real challenge will come after the vote, though, as Iraq confronts two enormous tasks -- setting up a functioning government and rewriting the constitution -- while also trying to subdue the insurgency.

We must do all we can to make sure that Iraq's experiment with democracy does not flounder, even if it results in something less than a Jeffersonian democracy. But to succeed in becoming a new and prosperous country, Iraq will need more than just our help.

European and other democratic nations can do their part by helping Iraq set up government ministries and agencies designed to oversee everything from defense and finance to basic human services and environmental protection. In fact, I strongly support a proposal that would call for countries to "adopt" one new agency in Iraq and help it develop, implement and execute sound policies.

Arab countries, who have been extremely critical of the war and American occupation, must realize they have a dog in this fight, too. On that point, I'm more optimistic than I was before my trip. As Saudi King Abdullah told me last week, "In Iraq, what's done is done."

To that end, I sensed that many of Iraq's neighbors -- including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar -- realize that it's in their interest to make sure Iraq does not erupt into civil war or become a haven for terrorism. They could help ensure that by forgiving the Iraqi debt they hold, while also working to improve political relations within Iraq. The United States, perhaps through the Arab League, should exert considerable influence in the region to make sure this happens.

A lot of hard work lies ahead for us and hopefully a new "coalition of the willing" in the Middle East. There are no easy choices or solutions. But if we begin to alter course, as outlined above, we increase the likelihood that America, Iraq and its neighbors will arrive at the destination we seek.

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